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# Free Limited Legal Help Services



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# Introduction

This document offers an overview and specific considerations related to court-annexed free limited legal help services for self-represented litigants (SRLs).

Limited legal assistance in the court does not include legal representation, but rather discrete acts of legal advice and assistance for court users. Free limited legal help, as opposed to full representation, allows attorneys to help a higher volume of SRLs by offering tailored, shorter services such as brief legal advice, document review, or assistance with forms.

Free limited legal assistance helps SRLs and courts in several ways. SRLs benefit by gaining free advice on their legal issues and information regarding legal processes, which improves their court experience. Courts benefit from SRLs who have been given even limited legal guidance from these desks. Limited legal help improves docket efficiency by advising litigants on their options, helping them prepare the needed documents, and preparing them on what to expect in court. In many courts, dockets can be delayed by unrepresented litigants who struggle to navigate complicated legal processes. This delay can be burdensome and place strain on high-volume courts. Limited legal help programs reduce unnecessary or incorrect filings and can help SRLs prepare more robust petitions to their motions being dismissed.<sup>[1]</sup> Courts can host limited legal help services to both improve SRLs experience with legal processes and improve docket efficiency.

To do this, courts can collaborate with legal aid organizations or volunteer attorneys to offer limited legal assistance at court annexed help desks or legal clinics. Courts can offer space in the courthouse for help desks, or, for courts operating online, can create breakout rooms for litigants to meet with limited legal help attorneys. Courts can also collaborate by sharing docket information with limited legal help providers.

There are many considerations when offering these services, as discussed below. The method of delivery, hours of operation, volume management, and staffing models are all important aspects to consider when offering a limited legal help program.



# Online vs. In-person

Limited legal help services can be offered online or in-person, with each requiring different considerations.

## Online

- Courts that are conducting proceedings online via Zoom, Webex, or other platforms, can collaborate with limited legal help providers by offering breakout rooms apart from the main online courtroom. Breakout rooms allows litigants who are interested in limited legal aid services to privately consult with an attorney. Court staff who are running the online proceedings can also help interested litigants navigate to the breakout room, as not all court users are familiar with online platforms such as Zoom and Webex.
  - Example: In Vermont, the Rent Escrow clinic, run by Legal Services Vermont, offers free counseling for tenants in rent escrow cases. As of July 2022, Washington County was conducting remote proceedings via Webex and the Rent Escrow clinic was also operating remotely via a breakout room.[2] The court clerk managing the online courtroom would help interested litigants navigate to a breakout room where they could consult with a Legal Services Vermont volunteer attorney.
- Remote proceedings and remote aid offer many benefits to users by eliminating the burdens of finding transportation, arranging childcare, or taking time off work. However, remote service providers of limited legal aid and court staff should be aware of the digital divide and be sure to assist those with low digital literacy. More information and specific solutions can be found in [Digital Divide Considerations](#).

# Online vs. In-person

## In-person

- Courts can offer space in the courthouse for limited legal aid programs to set up help desks or clinics.
  - Example: In Illinois, the Cook County limited legal help desks operate in-person in the courthouses. One example is the Collection Advice Desk, which is given its own room in the Richard J. Daley Center in Chicago, which houses Cook County's Circuit Court courtrooms and offices. The desk operates from 9:00AM-5:00PM, Monday to Friday.[3] The desk offers legal advice and discrete services for SRLs and is staffed by attorneys from the Coordinated Advice and Referral Program for Legal Services (CARPLS), a legal aid nonprofit.[4]
- Courts can collaborate with in-person help desks by sharing docket information to provide limited legal aid attorneys all the necessary information to assist potential SRLs.
- In-person offerings via walk-in or appointment are important resources for those who do not have access to internet or the appropriate remote access devices, or those who simply prefer in-person services.
- In-person limited legal help offerings in courthouses can engage potential clients while they are already in court, rather than through outreach via web, flyers, or social media.
- As mentioned previously, in-person services do present hurdles to litigants such as finding transportation, securing childcare, and taking time off work. Thus, these services are not accessible to all.
- Due to the benefits and barriers of each mode, offering services in-person and online ensures the highest level of accessibility.
  - Example: A help desk that operates both remotely and in-person can be found in the Justice & Diversity Center of the Bar Association of San Francisco's (JDC) Legal Help Center.[5] Litigants can call or email to schedule an appointment either online or in-person at the San Francisco or Oakland Courthouse.[6] This center is staffed by attorneys from the JDC and provides free legal information, legal advice, preparation for legal pleadings, and referrals to further resources. Offering both remote and in-person services allow people to access limited legal help via a platform most convenient for them.



# Timing

Offering services during alternative hours, outside of the typical 9:00AM-5:00 PM business hours, can help reach a larger group of people.

- While it is crucial to have in-court legal aid programs open during court business hours to serve litigants who came in for their court proceeding, alternative hours of service have many benefits as well.
- As outlined in this [Alternative Hours Toolkit](#), offering services outside of business hours helps people who do not have the time or resources to seek assistance or travel to courthouses during the day.
- Offering aid during alternative hours can help avoid barriers to aid such as taking time off work. Courts that offer alternative hours can work with help desks to also stay open during these extended hours.
- Although not a direct partnership with the court, legal aid hotlines can provide limited legal help services outside of normal business hours. Courts can publicize these services via court websites and flyers.
  - Example: In Colorado, the Colorado Judicial Branch website publicizes external legal advice partners. One offering from Colorado Legal Services is the Free Call4All Legal Clinic that operates every third Wednesday of the month from 5:00-8:00 PM.[7]
  - Example: In Utah, the Utah State Courts website offers a roundup of free legal clinics. One clinic in the list is the Street Law Legal Site, which has a civil legal aid clinic online once a month from 5:30-7:30PM, and in-person twice a month from 5:30-7:00PM.[8]

# Issue Specific Clinics vs. General Civil Legal Help

## Issue Specific Clinics

Some sites offer legal clinics or help desks that only provide aid for specific legal issues. Issue specific clinics can vary from daily help desks to monthly clinics.

- The decision to offer issue specific clinics or desks should be based on the needs of the community—the overall volume of unrepresented litigants, and the number of unrepresented litigants in specific case types, should inform the decision to offer help specifically for that case type. Courts can also combine docket and other data they generate with external data, such as U.S. Census or American Community Survey data, to better understand the needs of court users and tailor these programs. [9]
  - Example: In New York, the Volunteer Lawyers Project offers a help desk specifically for family law issues, including child support, custody, and orders of protection. This desk is open three times a week, in-person at the Erie County Family Court. [10]
- Basing a help desk or clinic around a specific issue can help control the volume of clients, which is helpful if the program has limited staff or hours of operation. Separating aid into issue specific desks can help allocate resources properly—help desks that address common legal issues may require more staff and hours of operation than a help desk that addresses a less common legal issue. When these programs use volunteer attorneys, having a more narrow scope can also help aid in attorney recruitment and can also make it possible to use supervised law students given the narrow set of likely issues.
  - Example: In Illinois, the Circuit Court of Cook County offers several Legal Advice Desks for walk-in legal advice. The desks are separated by legal topic, including orders of protection, debt collection, family law, elder help, expungement, foreclosure, small claims, child support, and adult guardianship. [11] The desks vary in hours operation, with some open every weekday from 9:00 AM-5:00 PM and others operating on specific weekdays or only operating for a few hours each day. [12]
- Population specific desks are similar to issue specific desks in that they address particular legal issues a group may deal with.
  - Example: In Illinois, Cook County offers the Elder Help Desk in the Richard J. Daley Center. This desk offers legal advice and document drafting for people who are 60 and older. The desk is run by Legal Aid Society of Metropolitan Family Services and is open 9:00AM-1:00PM Monday through Thursday for appointments and walk-ins. [13]



# Issue Specific Clinics vs. General Civil Legal Help

## General Civil Legal Help

Help desks can also offer general civil legal aid assistance. These programs offer a wider range of assistance by working on multiple areas of civil law.

- Offering help on a wide range of issues can be particularly useful for in-person desks in courthouses, as court users can stop by for help on whichever civil legal issue they are facing.
  - Example: As mentioned earlier, the Northern District of California offers a Legal Help Center run by the Justice & Diversity Center of the Bar Association of San Francisco. The help center offers free limited scope legal advice for SRLs navigating civil legal issues. The service operates in the San Francisco Courthouse and the Oakland Courthouse and offers remote aid. [[14](#)]



# Staffing Models

Limited legal help desks and legal clinics can be staffed by legal aid attorneys, volunteer lawyers, or law students.

## Legal Aid Attorneys

- Legal aid run help desks in courthouses provide crucial resources for unrepresented litigants. These programs utilize the existing resources, framework, and knowledge of legal aid organizations to offer consistent services from trained staff.
- Courts can partner with legal aid organizations by providing space in the courthouse for help desks or clinics, facilitating breakout rooms in an online courtroom, and sharing docket information. Courts can also publicize the availability of legal aid assistance.
  - Example: In Cook County, Illinois, the Legal Assistance Foundation and Cabrini Green Legal Aid run and staff the Expungement Help Desk and the Juvenile Expungement Help Desk. The Expungement Help Desk is housed in the Richard J. Daley Center and is open twice a week from 9:00AM to 12:00PM, and the Juvenile Expungement Help Desk is housed in the Cook County Juvenile Center and is open weekdays from 9:00AM-4:00PM. [15] At these desks, Cabrini Green Legal Aid attorneys help SRLs file for expungement or sealing of their records.

## Volunteer Attorneys

- Some limited legal help programs are staffed by volunteer lawyers. The obvious benefit of this model is having no staffing costs. Legal aid organizations can be partners in helping to set up these volunteer programs and training volunteer attorneys. [16] Local bar associations can help connect interested attorneys with appropriate volunteer opportunities. [17]
- Volunteer attorneys offering limited legal help under legal aid programs or court programs are subject to the conflict check rules set forth in Rule 6.5: Nonprofit & Court-Annexed Limited Legal Services Programs, and may be subject to further state or county legislation. They may be subject to further state or jurisdiction rules.
- In contrast to legal aid staffed programs, it can be harder to maintain available volunteers Monday through Friday. Still, volunteer lawyer-based programs can be rich areas of assistance, especially for less frequent clinics.
  - Example: The Legal Services Vermont Rent Escrow clinic, mentioned earlier in this report, is run by Legal Services Vermont but staffed by volunteer attorneys. This clinic offers several volunteer opportunities each month, with weekly or monthly opportunities in each county. [18] This opportunity provides attorneys with Continuing Legal Education credit in return for time spent serving litigants. [19] Volunteer attorneys are trained by Legal Services Vermont before serving litigants online or in-person.

## Law Students

- Law students have more restrictions on what services they can perform, but can help staff limited legal help desks or clinics under the supervision of attorneys. These students can help manage high-volume desks, and in return gain course credit or volunteer credit.
  - Example: Mentioned earlier, the New York Erie County Family Court Help Desk provides limited legal aid for family law issues. [20] The in-person clinic is staffed by two law school interns and a supervising attorney. The law students help screen litigants for eligibility and conduct general intake. [21]

# Summary

Providing free limited legal help services benefits both self-represented litigants and courts. Limited legal services allow SRLs to better navigate their legal issues which helps court dockets proceed more efficiently. Courts can host these legal aid services in the courthouse or facilitate these programs in virtual courtrooms. There are various benefits and barriers associated with offering aid online or in-person. Therefore, legal help programs should strive to offer aid over multiple platforms. Depending on the size and needs of a jurisdiction, setting up help desks and clinics that address specific legal issues can improve efficiency of aid and ensure that resources are allocated to case types with high levels of SRLs. These limited legal help services can be provided by legal aid attorneys, volunteer attorneys, or law students. Legal aid organizations offer expertise and staff attorneys for legal help desks. Volunteer attorneys are also an important resource to utilize, and courts can partner with legal aid organizations to train volunteer attorneys. Courts can explore a multitude of options regarding method of delivery, hours of operation, issue specific services, and staffing models when creating or modifying their limited legal help offerings. Curating limited legal help services to the needs of the court's jurisdiction is key to ensuring that the highest number of SRLs can access this aid.



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